

Connected Readers: Reading Networks and Community in early twentieth-century New Zealand

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Article abstract

Drawing on the archive of Fred Barkas (1854-1932), a middle-class New Zealand reader, the article explores how reading networks within local communities were established and how, where and when readers connected to other readers to form a local reading community. Barkas' letters reveal an often unorganised and diffuse reading culture in Timaru, NZ, which was highly social and defined along such markers as social status and cultural capital. Readers connected in a variety of ways, interwoven into other activities within the local community and in spaces not traditionally associated with reading. The article concludes by asking how readers in New Zealand were also connected to other reading communities around the British World and formed part of a global reading community.

CONNECTED READERS: Reading Networks and Community in early twentieth-century New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the archive of Fred Barkas (1854-1932), a middle-class New Zealand reader, the article explores how reading networks within local communities were established and how, where and when readers connected to other readers to form a local reading community. Barkas' letters reveal an often unorganised and diffuse reading culture in Timaru, NZ, which was highly social and defined along such markers as social status and cultural capital. Readers connected in a variety of ways, interwoven into other activities within the local community and in spaces not traditionally associated with reading. The article concludes by asking how readers in New Zealand were also connected to other reading communities around the British World and formed part of a global reading community.

RÉSUMÉ

À partir des archives privées de Fred Barkas (1854-1932), néo-zélandais de la classe moyenne, cet article étudie la formation des réseaux de lecteurs à l'intérieur des collectivités. Les lettres de Barkas mettent en évidence la représentation de l'activité qu'est la lecture à Timaru, en Nouvelle-Zélande, ainsi que sa dimension plutôt diffuse et peu organisée, sinon autour de facteurs tels le rang social et le capital culturel. On y voit de quelle façon un réseau de lecteurs s'est formé à Timaru, notamment par l'entremise d'autres activités que la lecture et dans des espaces qui ne sont pas traditionnellement associés à cette dernière. L'article se conclut par des observations sur les liens tissés entre les lecteurs néo-zélandais et d'autres lecteurs de par l'Empire britannique.

The story is set in Timaru, New Zealand. On the eve of 29 November 1922, Fred Barkas, the manager of a local stock and station agent, set down to write to his daughter Mary, living in England. Fred wrote Mary often and regularly, recording his life in diary-letters to her. On that evening he noted that he “had a most interesting evening with singing, music, books and

talk”, coming home as “it was striking midnight”. (LD 2491-30) On that occasion, he also borrowed a book from a friend, which he was looking forward to reading. As his correspondence with his daughter reveals, Barkas was an avid and constant reader. Through his reading he was embedded in a complex and active network of readers in the local community, defined by class and cultural capital, which provided him with reading material and recommendations. This article isolates one specific local instance of a reading community situated geographically and historically within the British World during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Using the archive of Fred Barkas (1854-1932), living in Timaru, New Zealand, between 1909 and 1932, the article explores how networks of readers were formed within local communities, how they operated and how readers established connections to other readers. I argue that, in the case of Fred Barkas and his reading network in Timaru, reading was integral to the intellectual, cultural and social landscape of a community. Secondly, reading as a cultural and social activity enabled connections to other readers and members of the community in often unorganised and diffuse ways and in spaces not primarily associated with and defined by reading.

The term “reading communities” is often used to describe groups of readers who have something in common “in their choice of literature, in their reading strategies, and in their conception of what constitutes «literature»” (Lyons, *Reading Culture* 155). Now an established notion, this understanding is based on Stanley Fish’s concept of interpretive communities, but enlarged with sociological and historical questions to better comprehend reading as a social activity. Members of a reading community do not always know each other. Rather, a community is constituted along such lines as gender or class, or it could be made up of “readers of the same newspaper”, or, for instance, of members of a particular literary society (Lyons, “The History of Reading” 8)¹. The reading community or network examined in this article follows this general definition. The readers in Barkas’s network were middle-class in economic terms, well-educated and enjoyed a similar social status relative to their cultural capital. But here, the members of this local reading network knew each other, and the network was defined by that knowledge. The focus of the article is not so much on what these readers had in common or what strategies they employed to make meaning of texts, but rather how, when and where a local reading community was formed.

Fred Barkas was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, in 1854, into a middle-class family and into a background in which books played an important role. His father owned a bookstore, and later operated a reading room and gallery. Barkas gained a degree in chemistry, and immigrated to New Zealand in 1881 to take up a lecturer position at Lincoln College, near Christchurch. He resigned after a few years and found employment with the Loan and Mercantile Agency, where he remained until his retirement in 1919. In 1887 Barkas married Amy Parker, an English music teacher, who had also immigrated to New Zealand. Soon after, their only daughter Mary Rushton Barkas was born. Amy did not find happiness in New Zealand, a country, she felt, that was uncultured and too isolated from the cultural centres of the world. This and the slow deterioration of the marriage led her to return to England permanently in 1909. Mary left New Zealand in 1913 to study for a medical degree in London. By that time, Fred had moved to Timaru, where he remained until his death in 1932. His close and affectionate relationship with Mary was sustained through an extensive and frequent correspondence between the two, consisting of “daily pages” informing each other in extraordinary detail about their respective activities and thoughts. A large component of their letters covered their intellectual interests and both described in great detail their reading experiences to each other. Most letters – by Fred and by Mary – have survived, and are now part of a 67-volume collection of letters and reminiscences of Fred Barkas, held at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington.

Reading the Barkas correspondence, it is possible to gain insights into a complex reading network, and some of the reading cultures which contributed to the wider cultural life in the local community. Timaru, about half-way in between the two larger South Island centres Christchurch and Dunedin, was a provincial and prosperous port town, serving the large pastoral hinterland of South Canterbury. By 1910, the population of Timaru was about 11,000. A well-established cultural and intellectual infrastructure served the community, with a Mechanics’ Institute and Library in existence since 1868, a musical society, and several other institutes and clubs (Parker 41-51). In 1909 the Carnegie-financed new Public Library building was opened, and Timaru was one of the first towns in New Zealand to offer a truly free library service to borrowers (Traue 28).²

Readers met in a variety of places, one of them the public library. A letter Barkas wrote in July 1918 describes one of the ways readers in Timaru connected to each other, lent and recommended reading material, and talked about their reading.

When I was at the Library yesterday morning returning Walpole's «Green Mirror», Jack Cotterill came in & naturally annexed it, so we got talking of Walpole's books and I mentioned that I had not yet read «The Duchess of Wrexhe». "I'll mark it to be kept for you" said Miss Culverwell, and then added, «but I'm afraid you'll find it rather dirty by this time – it seems to be always out». Then Jack Cotterill chipped in to say he had a copy, that [he] thought it was at his office, & he'd be pleased to lend it to me. Sure enough when I got back to my office after lunch it was there nicely wrapped up awaiting me; so you see I've got plenty to read this week.

24 July 1918, LD 2491-28

The librarian Evelyn Culverwell was an important figure for Barkas' reading and to some extent for his network of readers.³ Barkas and Culverwell had a particularly close relationship. She often recommended titles to him and established connections between readers by passing on recommendations and advice. She received a regular mentioning in his correspondence with Mary and it becomes evident that he valued highly her advice and trusted her recommendations. Barkas accessed a large amount of his reading material from the public library. Of the 873 titles he recorded reading during the years 1909, 1911-12, 1917-22 and 1927-32, he added information on how he accessed this reading material for 500 of these titles. Of these 500 titles, 269 were borrowed from the library.⁴ In other words, 54 per cent of the books and periodicals Barkas read during these years were accessed through the library, and many of them recommended and chosen by the librarian.

The library served as an important space to access reading material. It was also a space where readers could meet, to discuss books and other matters, and connect, even when they were not in the library at the same time. In June 1918, Miss Culverwell handed Barkas a collection of essays by George Macaulay Trevelyan because William Alexander, the editor of the *Timaru Herald* and a friend of Barkas had asked her to do so, as he wanted Barkas to

read them (27 June 1918, LD 2491-28).⁵ In another example drawn from the letters to Mary, Barkas wrote about just having read: “«French Windows» ... a series of War Sketches by an English Catholic Priest [John Ayscough], reprinted from «The Month» about which Mrs. Westmacott has been raving – she made the Halls put their name down at the Library for it & they passed it on to me” (20 July 1918, LD 2491-28). The recommendation by one reader led other readers to take the book out of the library, and the Halls being close friends of Barkas, he eventually ended up with the library copy, without having set a foot into the library.

In addition to spaces intrinsically associated with reading, like the public library, reading occurred in more unexpected sites. Readers passed each other in the streets, visited each other to exchange reading material, met at the South Canterbury Club – an exclusively male, middle and upper class institution – and they even talked about reading while playing golf. When Barkas was handed Turgenev’s *A Nest of Hereditary Legislators* by the librarian Miss Culverwell, he recalled that “Jack Cotterill mentioned as we were playing our round the other day that he had read it, one of the first Russian books he had read and that he’d been charmed with it; probably therefore I’ll be reading this before I set on «Crime & Punishment»” (10 August 1918, LD 2491-28). It is interesting to note that because his friend Jack Cotterill, the same reader mentioned in the excerpt above from the same month, liked *A Nest of Hereditary Legislators* very much, Barkas decided to depart from his intended reading schedule to read this one first, before starting on a book he had presumable chosen himself. Turgenev became a suitable “warm-up” into his foray into Russian literature. Over the period this archive covers, 1886 to 1932, taking up recommendations quickly is a frequent element of Barkas’ reading pattern. It shows the value he placed on recommendations and advice from his circle of reading friends and his daughter Mary, and is one way in which other readers influenced his reading. It is also an indication that Barkas was flexible in his order of reading. Choosing to read Turgenev first was an act of taking up a friend’s recommendation and could also be interpreted as the desire to connect to other readers by enabling conversation over a common text.

Just a couple of weeks before talking about Turgenev on the golf course, Barkas had run into his already mentioned friend William Alexander, the editor of the local newspaper. He told Mary:

Alexander passed me as he was going down to his office last night, stopped me, put his hand in his coat pocket saying, «You're just the man I wanted to see, I've got a gem of a pamphlet here for you to read, «The Pale Shade» by Gilbert Murray – delightfully written and altogether charming.» Of course I read it before I went to bed last night – it merited fully Alexander's praise.

8 July 1918, LD 2491-28

The accidental meeting in the street and passing on of reading material was no exceptional occurrence. On another occasion, on his way to supper at the house of his friends the art and music teachers Lilian and Blanche Hall he was stopped by “Tommie Thompson, [who] had just read a wonderful book about the war and pressed loan of it upon” him (18 November 1918, LD 2491-28). Barkas enjoyed the book, *Private Peat* so much that he felt he wanted to not only recommend the title to Mary, but also tell her how he came to read it. By the time he wrote the letter to Mary, he had already passed the book on to his landlady, Miss McIver, who was “devouring” it (18 November 1918, LD 2491-28).

Instances of collective reading practices like these, as reported through Barkas's letters, give insights into a highly connected and spontaneous local reading culture. Books were passed on, recommended, carried around and talked about in an active network of readers in Timaru, who happily and readily shared their experiences and reading material. These instances illustrate that reading was an activity that connected Barkas to other people in the community, an activity which could mix and overlap with other activities, such as music and sport, and occur in spaces which were not necessarily traditionally and exclusively defined by reading and literature. They also show that reading cultures in Timaru were partly spontaneous and constantly being organically remade and reshaped. A chance meeting on the street led to Barkas not only enjoying a title he had not heard of before, but also to him passing a strong recommendation on to his daughter living in England and to his landlady, as she was the next to read it. In this way, the initial recommendation by one reader extended to a whole group of readers, in Timaru and outside the local community, and resulted in at least three readers reading the one copy of *Private Peat*. Reading cultures are often little organised and more lively, unexpected and complex than can be traced from

more traditional sources such as library, bookseller or other institutional records.

Yet, there certainly existed a number of different reading cultures and communities in Timaru, and even within the loosely defined network of readers that Barkas was part of, opinions and preferences could diverge. While Barkas followed the advice of other readers often, it appears he trusted his close group of friends most when it came to reading material. For example, a title that excited many of his fellow members of the Timaru Orchestral Society, he went to borrow from his friends the Rules, yet it did not find a favourable review by Barkas. He wrote:

Besides getting back my copy of «Islands Nights Entertainments»⁶ I borrowed from Mrs. Rule Maeterlinck's «Pelleas and Melisande» – some of Percy Rule's letters from Camp, and a book which they had all been talking about as we sat round the fire at the end of the Musical Club meeting called «Dracula» by Bram Stoker; a book which they all said [sic] should NOT be read by a person of timid nature or nervous tendency – certainly NOT to be read late at night before going to bed.

26 August 1918, LD 2491-28

But Barkas could not restrain himself. After having dinner and writing a few letters to friends, he wrote to Mary,

I settled down to «Dracula». Probably so omnivorous a reader as you will have read this wild and weird story of human Vampires, Were-wolves – and lunatics, it's thrilling enough, but as I read on it began to dawn upon me that I had read some (if not all) of it before – years & years ago – and then, like all these too unreal stories, it began to bore me and I began to skip – and by 12.30 I had skipped to the end and so went to bed, without one qualm, quiver or thrill.

26 August 1918, LD 2491-28

Perhaps Barkas was too experienced a reader to be carried away by the thrill and horror of *Dracula*, perhaps it did not excite him because he had already read it years earlier. But he did want to know what everyone had been reading and discussing in such excitement and picking up a copy of the text made him part of this reading community in Timaru. While he did not share

the positive reviews, he now would have been able to participate in any future conversations about the book.

Another, less formal, yet very social and public space to meet and talk about books was the local restaurant “The Hydro”, where Barkas regularly spent his evenings, dining with friends, acquaintances or visitors to Timaru. After dinner, guests often retired to the upstairs premises to smoke and chat about the latest political, cultural or personal news. On one such evening in 1918,

the talk came round to books – it has a way of doing it. Jones considered it was not a wise thing to read too much – it so unsettled your ideas & convictions; Mrs. Edgar rather feared that most modern books (by which I fancy she meant the ordinary novel of the circulating Library – I saw «Greatheart» of Mrs. Dell lying on the table) were hardly desirable reading. «I never read any books» was Phyllis’s contribution to the conversation.

4 October 1918, LD 2491-287

Barkas did not comment any further on what he thought about the conversation but what is significant for the purpose of this article is that even over supper on a Friday night, the talk came to reading, and literature, arts and music were common themes. Reading as an activity as well as talk about reading were part of the sociability and social exchange within the local community.

Barkas also did not record his contributions to the conversation. Did he just observe and listen to the opinions voiced about books and reading, which to him – a constant and avid reader – must have seen ridiculous? It is reasonable to suggest that Barkas would not have agreed either with Mr. Jones nor Mrs. Edgar about the dangers or uselessness of reading in general and of reading novels in particular. Barkas also made a qualitative judgement. By pointing out that the remarks about the dangers of novel reading must have been in relation to Ethel M. Bell’s *Greatheart* – an “ordinary novel of the circulating library” – Barkas implied that Mrs. Edgar’s judgement about reading and novels was limited to a particular genre and could hardly hold true for all novels. This episode is interesting as an indicator of the different kinds and different qualities of reading cultures and communities in Timaru. The stock of circulating libraries in general and

books by Ethel M. Bell in particular were not books Barkas would have chosen, despite the fact that he read rather indiscriminately and was usually open to recommendations. On an earlier date, he had confessed to Mary that he was “not acquainted” with the work of the author. Then also, his statements suggest that Bell and her romance stories did not conform with his literary taste: “The other very «popular» writer with whose work I am also not acquainted is a Mrs. Dell of Sydenham – quite an elderly lady (so Blanche [Hall] says) who only discovered her talent, or her public, I don’t know which, quite late in life; her books I am told are also «much read».” (13 July 1917, LD 2491-27)

Barkas’s dismissive statement about books in the stock of circulating libraries and the comments made by his fellow diners about books and reading also suggests that there were several reading communities operating in Timaru and with them several reading cultures. Barkas’s network of readers was predominantly of the professional middle class. His friends and acquaintances were lawyers, solicitors, politicians, doctors, head-masters, managers and other high-level white collar workers.⁸ Class markers in New Zealand were less firmly based on Marxist categories derived from industrial societies and, as Melanie Nolan has pointed out, New Zealand “was one of the more open societies in the British or developed world, with relatively more opportunity for social mobility.” (Nolan 367) In this situation class markers were more permeable. Education, the value of culture and reading became important markers of social status.

Barkas’ record of reading does not allow us any insights into the reading of different classes within Timaru. He would have interacted with members of the working classes through his position with the Loan and Mercantile Agency, an agency for many station owners and run holders. But he did not socialise with working-class men or women in his leisure time, and it appears had little notion what these sections of the local community were reading. There are no references about him exchanging literary views with working-class readers in the public library, for instance, a place he frequented weekly, and because of the dearth of sources it is impossible to establish a breakdown of the users of the library according to occupation and class. While he occasionally made more general comments about the intellectual capabilities – or limitations – of readers in Timaru, it seems these

comments were primarily based on his assumptions and perceived superiority than on actual experiences and knowledge.⁹

Barkas was a constant part of a readers' network in Timaru, and it appears one of the more active readers when it came to reaching out to others and making reading a shared experience. Besides talking about books and pamphlets, or borrowing material, he often mentioned that he had spent the evening reading aloud to and with friends, in particular his close friends Lilian and Blanche Hall. More often than not, it was him reading to the Halls, rather than them reading to him, and it also seems that more often than not, he chose the material he wanted to share with them: usually periodical articles of a political nature. One night in August 1918, after he got home from spending the evening with some other friends, the barrister Francis J. Rolleston and his wife, he sat down to his usual night-time read, in this instance the June number of the *Round Table*, admiring the first article "The Ordeal", which was a "wonderfully well done review of the situation during the months March / May", referring to the Great War. He assumed that Mary must have read it some time ago, but concluded that "all the same it strikes me as well worth a careful second reading – which I shall in all likelihood do by reading it aloud some night to the Halls." (12 August 1918, LD 2491-28) Barkas did not record reading the article to the Halls, but a few weeks later he read to the Lionel Curtis's *The Problem of the Commonwealth* (30 September 1918, LD 2491-28). Between July 1917 and August 1919, Barkas mentioned twenty three instances of reading aloud with the Halls or other friends.¹⁰ The event of reading aloud to family and friends as a collective reading experience is perhaps the most powerful way of connecting to other readers through reading. Reading aloud was a constant element in Barkas's reading practice. In this context of reading communities, it represents one way of reading that connected Barkas to other readers in his community, and connected him in a very close and private manner.

In his letters to Mary, Fred Barkas depicts himself at the centre, the core of a number of overlapping reading communities and reading cultures in Timaru. Frequently, friends and acquaintances approached him to ask for advice on what to read, for suggestions and his opinion, wanted to discuss the latest bestseller with him, exchanged newspapers and periodicals and were keen to alert him to a particular title they thought he would find worthwhile reading. In his letters to Mary he presented himself as a central

character in this web of cultural and intellectual exchange. A series of consecutive letters in February 1919 creates this image very vividly. On Thursday night, 20 February, he wrote:

Alexander has just been in to have his usual yarn – what he more especially wanted was to know if I had a copy of last Saturday's «Dominion» as he wanted to cut some extracts from «Liber's» review of Weston's recent book about N.Z. Soldiers in the War, to use in the Herald Saturday's «Book Page». Someone had boned [stolen] his copy from the office after he had carefully put it aside for use tonight.

LD 2491-29¹¹

Only a couple days earlier, someone stopped Barkas on the street to tell him about “Kidd's new book”, which he “must read”, and was the subject of many a conversation of all the “reading people” in Timaru (18 February 1919, LD 2491-29). And on Monday, the 24th of February, Barkas told Mary how he had spent the previous day reading to his fellow boarders at 9 Hewling Street his latest favourite, a biography of W.E. Ford by J.D. Beresford (LD 2491-29). Within less than a week, he had been talking about books, reading to and been approached by at least five other readers in Timaru, either wanting to borrow a text from him, sharing the latest literary gossip or simply enjoying a night of reading together. Reading clearly was a central social activity for Barkas and cemented his position at the heart of a number of reading communities in Timaru.

The instance of “Kidd's new book”, as it was termed on the streets of Timaru, *The Science of Power*, which all the “reading people” were talking about deserves some more consideration. It is a fascinating case study of a reading community, not formally organised but defined within the limits of a town and constituted along such markers as class, cultural capital and shared literary interests. In this instance the reading community was tied together by the more or less simultaneous consumption and subsequent discussion of one text. Barkas heard about “Kidd's new book” for the first time in February 1919, telling Mary that “Mrs. Smithson is full of it”, and that he was stopped on the street by a friend [Clarry], and told that he “must read it” (18 February 1919, LD 2491-29). Usually receptive to recommendations, he did not pick the book up, however, until a few months later, in June 1919, when it was still a topic amongst the literature-

interested in Timaru. After his usual supper with his friends the Halls he took the chance of borrowing from them a copy of the book, which, as Barkas remarked to Mary, “everybody (reading body, I mean) seems to have read – doubtless you have too” (18 June 1919, LD 2491-29). He began reading it a couple of days after taking it home and his first impressions were: “It’s interesting, so far, but not exactly easy, his argument about the disastrous effects of Darwinism as applied to the Military State in Germany & the Commercial State in England has come upon me as an awakening surprise” (18 June 1919, LD 2491-29). However, in July he had still not finished it, “so many interesting or attractive books came along” that it “had been pushed aside” (24 July 1919, LD 2491-29).¹² Apparently, it had not succeeded in gripping Barkas’ attention, as he often finished a book within one or two days. Finally, on a Sunday evening in August, over three weeks later, he was able to tell Mary that he had finished *The Science of Power* that afternoon, but the argument, it seems did not strike him as realistic and plausible:

[H]e certainly makes out a strong case for his theory that the emotion of the ideal if impressed on the young would be the ruling factor of social heredity & the engine for pushing civilization ahead – but to carry it out all teachers, preachers, writers, politicians & propagandists & priests would have to be agreed upon the ideal, the emotion of or for which has to be stirred up in the young. I suppose you’ve read the book?

17 August 1919, LD 2491-29

Despite the fact that most readers of his network had read the book and several other readers had recommended it to him, Barkas did not enjoy it. Nevertheless, he wanted to hear Mary’s opinion. That he addressed Mary directly, assuming that she had also read the book, is noteworthy. He often concluded his reflections on reading matter by asking her whether she knew the title or suspecting she would have seen the book already. By assuming that Mary had read the *The Science of Power* already, as most of the “reading people” in Timaru, he included her in his reading community, despite the fact that her physical position was far removed. In this way, the space Barkas’s reading network occupied was not solely a geographical or physical one, but also a mental space, in which the actual location of participating readers became partly secondary.

Fred Barkas's correspondence offers insights into some of the instances in which he connected to other members of the local community through his reading. These connections were often spontaneous and little organised. Books and literature were discussed in more traditional reading spaces like reading groups and the library. Readers in Timaru also talked about books and exchanged recommendations and reading material on the golf course, at meetings of the Timaru Musical Society, over dinner at the local restaurant and while smoking and relaxing at the South Canterbury Club. Barkas was stopped on the street and visited other readers in their home to read aloud and to borrow books and magazines. All these instances of readers connecting with other readers created a reading community in Timaru, based on informal networks rather than institutionally-based associations. These networks were defined by cultural capital, class and a shared appreciation of literature. In some instances, they were also defined by gender, such as the male-only reading space of the local gentlemen's club, though in this case study of Fred Barkas, by and large the reading community comprised both female and male readers.¹³ They could change over time, both in constitution of membership and in strength, and were constantly being re-made and re-shaped.

The focus of this article has been to highlight the ways in which reading was interwoven into a local community and to shed light on one of the many informal networks that enabled a variety of reading cultures at any one moment in one place. Barkas's network was one of the reading communities operating in Timaru, but certainly there were others he did not belong to. A next step in the study of local reading communities would be to examine the many different reading networks present in the local town to gain more insights into the complexities and symbolism of reading within and across class and gender boundaries, and across varying networks. But let us consider Barkas and his geographical position for a moment. How did Barkas see his location and positioning in the British Empire, and within the wider world? How did he see his location relevant for his reading and wider cultural life? This article does not attempt to fully analyse this aspect. But it is worth considering Barkas's location within a wider world of reading. There are frequent references to Mary, implying that she must have already read the latest book or periodical article, as she was closer to the hub of cultural activity within the wider British World that mattered to Barkas. In 1919 he asked Mary to write him more frequently, explaining:

I am very gratified if you find my «pages» interesting living as I do in so remote a village the «Cabbage & Cow» sort of existence I do (according to your Mother's picturing of it), how much the more interesting your «pages», living at the «Hub» of the Great World, you so young, keen, able and intelligent.

23 January 1919, LD 2491-29

Partly, he saw Mary as being able to write more “interesting” pages because of her younger age, of her sharp intellect and attentive mind. But partly, this statement suggests, her life was more interesting because she was living at the “Hub of the Great World”. What precisely this “Hub” meant and implied remains unexplained. Mary was living in London at the time, so it is probable he was referring to the metropole. While there is a slight hint of sarcasm in Barkas's language when referring to comments about New Zealand life made by his estranged wife Amy, this sarcasm seems also to be based on a realisation on his part that New Zealand was not part of the centre of the “Great World”. However, this must not necessarily be a negative conclusion. The entirety of Barkas's letters, not just the few examples given here, creates a strong impression that he led a satisfied life in terms of cultural activities and expression. Cultural opportunities and events were perhaps fewer or less novel than in greater centres of cultural production elsewhere in the British World. Yet Barkas was very able to appropriate what was on offer for him locally and through his informal networks. While he sometimes regretted that new releases reached New Zealand with some delay, the nature of his reading did not seem to have been affected by his geographical location.

How did Fred Barkas and his reading network compare to other readers – similar in class and cultural capital – elsewhere, for instance within the cultural sphere of the British World? Further research into trans-local or global reading communities would encompass a comparison to other readers and their local reading communities outside New Zealand. One such reader could be the Canadian Margaret McMicking. In September 1939, the *The Colonist* ran a series of articles in celebration of one of Victoria, B.C.'s citizens. A feature article on 12 September was titled “B.C. Pioneer Ninety Today”, marking the 90th birthday of Margaret Leighton McMicking (in McMicking, box 11, folder 6). Another, a few days later, reported: “More Than 250 Guests Attend Celebration, [...] Affection of Community

Expressed in Gifts” (in McMicking, box 11, folder 6). The *Victoria Daily Times* noted: “Spontaneous and moving testimony to the high place Mrs. R.B. McMicking occupies in the esteem of the community was forthcoming yesterday afternoon [...] at a party unique in Victoria’s annals” (“Gathering Does Honour”). McMicking’s picture greeted readers of both newspapers for several days, and the reports of celebration and gatherings in honour of the “pioneer woman” continued over weeks. In December of the same year, 1939, another milestone was celebrated in the local newspapers of the capital city: the 40th anniversary of the Victoria Literary Society (in McMicking, box 11, folder 6). One of the founding members of the society had been Margaret McMicking.

As these newspaper headlines suggest, Margaret McMicking (1849-1944) was a prominent woman in Victoria, B.C. Born in Scotland, she arrived in Victoria in 1863. In 1869 she married Robert Burns McMicking, then superintendent of the B.C. Telegraph line. After several years spent in Yale in the interior of British Columbia, the McMickings moved back to Victoria in 1890, where Margaret lived until her death in 1944. She had 7 children, and was an active member of the community. Not uncommon for middle-class women in this period, she was part of an active associational culture in Victoria, with memberships or founding positions in the Local Council of Women, the King's Daughters, the Burns' Club, the Dickens Fellowship, the Historical Society, the Alexandra Club, the Authors' Club and the Navy League. Her involvement in many of these clubs spanned several decades. She was also a founding member of the Victoria Literary Society, established in 1899 and remained a member for the following 36 years. Her political interests and sense of imperial citizenship was lived out through her leadership in the Victoria branch of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire. DeNel Rehberg Sedo, taking the Victoria Literary Society and McMicking as a case study of communities of reading in the *History of the Book in Canada*, pointed out that much of McMicking’s life centred on literature and reading (479-481). For McMicking, reading was one of a number of activities enabling her to take on an active role in her local community. Reading groups and literary societies were one sphere in the public face of the community in which women could openly take up leadership positions and establish a role in the public life of the community. I have introduced the Canadian McMicking at the end of this article to suggest the possibilities of closer comparisons between readers located in

similar communities and within a shared cultural realm for a better understanding of the elements of class, gender and place within reading communities. For Margaret McMicking reading was as central an element of her cultural and social life as it was for Barkas. It was a tool of social and cultural interaction and a means of creating and maintaining a particular position within the local community. Through their involvement in a number of societies and informal networks, McMicking and Barkas actively shaped the cultural and social landscapes of Victoria and of Timaru. I suggest that Barkas and McMicking and the spontaneous and complex nature of their respective reading communities – operating in a variety of spaces – were not exceptional cases within the British World at the beginning of the twentieth century. Moreover, both sought to connect their local communities to a broader reading culture. Barkas wrote to his daughter living in England; McMicking joined reading societies like the Dickens Fellowship and the Burns Club; and both read books, periodicals and newspapers which circulated around the British World. This article has focussed on a local case study to highlight the complexities and dynamics of a local reading community or network as revealed through personal correspondence. The next step must be to overcome what Leslie Howsam has termed “a tension between the specific and the general” (1100), by integrating readers like Barkas and McMicking into a trans-local study of reading and to further investigate the connections between readers, separated by vast geographical distance yet also part of a global reading community.

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Notes

¹ I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance provided by Victoria University of Wellington and the Bibliographical Society of America to carry out research for this article. I would also like to thank the audience at the Canadian Association for the Study of Book Culture conference in Ottawa, May 2009, and the anonymous reviewer of this article for their generous and constructive comments.

² Despite the fact that one of the conditions to obtain funds from the Carnegie Corporations was that the lending of books ‘should be free from all charge’, only three of the eighteen Carnegie-funded public libraries in New Zealand observed this rule: Dunedin, Timaru and Alexandra. The others charged subscriptions. (Traue 13-34)

³ Evelyn Culverwell was appointed in April 1913 as the first female chief librarian in New Zealand (O’Connor 18).

⁴ This data is drawn from the Fred Barkas Reading Experience database created by the author and drawn from Barkas’ reading record, covering the years 1891-1913, 1917-1922 and 1927-1932.

⁵ William Frederick Alexander (1882-1957) was the editor of the *Timaru Herald* from 1910 to 1920, when he took over the editorship of Dunedin’s *Evening Star*. Under Alexander the conservative *Timaru Herald* ‘sharpened’ its ‘news coverage’, ‘enriched its literary and cultural content’, and as a result outstripped the more liberal evening paper *Timaru Post*. Alexander’s literary interests were reflected in his role as a poetry anthologist. (Croot)

⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson was one of Barkas’s favourite authors, and he read several titles repeatedly.

⁷ Another example for readers meeting over dinner is: “Rule had brought for me two «Kirchner Albums» each 12 prints in colour published by the «Sketch» offices, 172 Strand W/.C. price 1/- [...] There was also an account of Raphael Kirchner and his work which Rule had torn from an American Magazine. I suppose you have seen these colour prints? They say they are the most prized decorations in the dug-outs of both French & English soldiers all along the Western Front.” (5 July 1918, LD 2491-28)

⁸ *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand* (1904-1907) includes brief biographies of some of the members of Barkas’s network.

⁹ See for example, Barkas's conclusion after he tested Hugh de Selincourt, *A Soldier of Life* for the library: "It's clever, it's subtle, it tries its best to be quite honest about things but it ends on a plane of transcendental, poetic idealism. I think there might be 20 or possibly 25 people in Timaru who might read it with some appreciation and understanding, but I feel sure it would bore the ordinary week-end novel reader" (30 April 1918, LD 2491-27).

¹⁰ This data is drawn from the Fred Barkas Reading Experience database.

¹¹ The two newspapers referred to are the Wellington morning paper *The Dominion* and the Timaru morning paper *The Timaru Herald*. The book is Claude H. Weston, *Three years with the New Zealanders* (London : Skeffington, [1918?]).

¹² In the meantime, Barkas had read the following books: William John Locke, *The Rough Road*; "Sapper", *The Human Touch*; Henry Bordeaux, *The Fear of Living*; Samuel Butler, *The Notebooks of Samuel Butler*; Rose Macaulay, *What Not: A Prophetic Comedy*; W.J. Dawson, *The Father of a Soldier*; William Henry Hudson, *Far Away and Long Ago*; H.M. Hyndman, *The Awakening of Asia* and G.D.H. Cole, *Self-Government in Industry*.

¹³ This article is part of a larger, current research project on middle-class reading in the British Wold, c. 1890-1930. At the time of publication, the project has not been advanced enough to make any conclusive comments about the role of gender and gender dynamics within Barkas's reading network and within reading cultures in Timaru. Certainly, the aspect of gender for the formation and operation of reading communities deserves further investigation.

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